WHAT IS FORMOSUM IN COPA 33?*

hic age pampinea fessus requiesce sub umbra
et grauidum roseo necte caputistrophio,
†formosum† tenerae decerpens ora puellae
a pereat cui sunt prisa supercilia!

This note discusses the line 33 of Pseudo-Virgil’s *Copa: formosum tenerae decerpens ora puellae*. This line opens with *formosum* which is considered, almost universally, as corrupt and thus identified by obeli marks in critical editions of the poem.1

The reading *formosum* was defended by F. Buecheler.2 He interpreted it as a neuter accusative used adverbially which refers to *decerpens*. To support his interpretation, Buecheler quoted the following examples: *perfidum ridens* (Hor. C. 3,27); *pavidum blandita* (Ov. Met. 9,69); and *salve aeternum*. But none of these is appropriate: in fact, *perfidum* is an internal accusative (‘laughing a treacherous laughter’); *pavidum* is an adjective referring to the *famulus* of the previous verse (*deque suis unum famulis pudibunda vocavit / et pavidum blandita ‘fer bas, fidissime, nostro’ / dixit . . . *); who shortly afterwards (v. 576) is also described as scared (*trepidantis ab ore ministri*); *aeternum* is an accusative of extension in time. But also the sense that was obtained in Buecheler’s interpretation – *formosa basiatio* (as he himself put it) – is somewhat odd, so most scholars still regard the text as corrupt.

The reading *formosus*, present in some twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscripts, should also be rejected as lacking sense. A form of the adjective *formosus* should refer, as one might expect, not to the *viator*, but to the girl or to her lips, as in a passage of Ov. Am. 2,15,17: *umida formosae tangam prius ora puellae* that the author of *Copa* could have known. Thus V.W. Clausen suggested two emendations that would mean this sense:

formosa et tenerae decerpens ora puellae
or
formosa interea decerpens ora puellae4

In both Clausen’s proposals the corruption can be explained paleographically. In the first one, however, one could question the *et* with the participle *decerpens* after *necte* in the previous verse (*et grauidum roseo necte caput strophio, / formosa et tenerae decerpens ora puellae*). In Clausen’s second conjecture one could object that the *interea* is redundant, since it repeats the sense implied in the present participle *decerpens*.

---

*) I am indebted to my colleagues Mikołaj Szymański and Konrad Kokoszkiewicz for their discussion of an earlier draft of this paper.

1) See E.J. Kenney, Appendix Vergiliana, Oxford 1966 (OCT) (hereafter: Appendix), 82.

2) F. Buecheler, Coniectanea, RhM 45, 1890, 234.

3) See OLD, 1338, s. v. *perfidus* (a).

4) Appendix, 82.
I would like to suggest another emendation:

*formosum os tenerae decerpens ore puellae*

The following process of corruption might be assumed: at first the word *os* was omitted, and later a scribe, searching for an object of *decerpens*, changed the ablative *ore* into the accusative *ora*. It is also possible that the order was reversed, with *ore* corrupted into *ora*. There are analogies to this kind of corruption in other parts of the Appendix. For example, in Cat. 9,38: *mutavit placidis tempore consulibus* all the manuscripts incorrectly read *tempora* (the correction is owed to editio Aldina 1517). Or, in Mor. 34 the correct reading *pectore lata* is present only in one of mss (W), while the others have *pectora*. Especially the former example is particularly relevant to our passage of *Copa*. A scribe evidently adjusted the case of the noun to the close-standing verb *mutavit*. This shows that his corrections were, as often happens, short-sighted. A similar process might have happened in our passage: *ore* was changed into the plural accusative *ora* – the object of *decerpens* – and then *os* was omitted as redundant. Perhaps the first stage of this process was also due to the fact that a scribe had in his mind the ending of Ovid’s verse: *ora puellae*.

As far as the meaning is concerned, a good analogy for *ore decerpere* can be found in Catul. 68,127 *oscula mordenti semper decerpere rostro*. It could be objected, however, that I am proposing *os*, and not *oscula*, as the object of *decerpere*, and that this word is not attested elsewhere with the meaning of ‘kiss’ (this objection goes also for Clausen’s emendations). But the two words – *formosum* and *decerpere* – indicate that *os* does not literally mean ‘kiss’ here. Instead we have here a metaphor: the *viator decerpit formosum os puellae* as in Col. 9,14,18 *apes (…) de- cerpunt flores* (‘the bees gather the nectar from the flowers’) or in Plin. Nat. 21,56 *thymum et apes decerpunt* (‘the bees gather the nectar from thyme’), which means, of course, that he kisses the girl, but it is said in a more sophisticated way. The quoted passages of Columella and Plinius show that the object of *decerpere* can be not only something that is ‘plucked’, but also the thing from which something is gathered.5

Warsaw

Włodzimierz Olszaniec

---

5) See OLD, 489, s. v. *decerpo* (2).